



Lifting the Chains: The Black Freedom Struggle Since Reconstruction, William H. Chafe

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The oral archives that inform William H. Chafe's *Lifting the Chains: The Black Freedom Struggle Since Reconstruction* have been decades in the making. The documentation of generations of African American activism and experience is central to this book, which is notable for the scope not only of the archives themselves, but also the contributions of the author himself to their collection: a career's worth of

research and advocacy. Indeed, in a 2023 interview, Chafe described the book as ‘a culmination of the work that I’ve been doing all these years’.¹

Chafe, now Professor Emeritus at Duke University, was one of two junior academics who, in 1971, started Duke’s pioneering oral history program.² Among its graduates were Scott Ellsworth, whose work on the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot remains definitive,³ and two future African American presidents of the Oral History Association: Albert S. Broussard and Alphine W. Jefferson.⁴ Jefferson remarked in 2015 that the program ‘helped to validate oral history as a legitimate source’.⁵ In the mid-1990s, Chafe’s students conducted interviews for the ‘Behind the Veil Oral History Project’.⁶ Alongside Chafe’s own research and experiences in civil rights activism, these interviews are the foundations of the book.⁷

Six themes, each well supported by the sources, form Chafe’s argument. First, the struggle for freedom and equality ‘has been carried out primarily by Black Americans’ (p. xv). Second, it ‘was led by both men and women’. Third, activism centred around ‘all-Black institutions’. Fourth, white participation was mostly minimal and/or self-interested (p. xvi). Fifth, it was Blacks who ‘carried [the struggle] forward’

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- 1 William H. Chafe, ‘William H. Chafe Celebrates a Career as Professor Emeritus of Duke University’, MarquisListeeVideos (27 February 2023), interview, 12:43 to 12:47. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_oZ6ESMY0I. Accessed 25 April 2024.
 - 2 William H. Chafe, *Lifting the Chains: The Black Freedom Struggle Since Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), xiv.
 - 3 Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
 - 4 Oral History Association, Past Presidents. Available at <https://oralhistory.org/about/past-presidents/>. Accessed 26 April 2024; Alphine W. Jefferson, ‘Echoes from the South: The History and Methodology of the Duke University Oral History Program, 1972–1982’, *The Oral History Review* 12 (1984): 59–62.
 - 5 Alphine W. Jefferson, ‘Alphine Jefferson’, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (15 August 2016), interview, 2:10 to 2:14. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4erKBYPWHJY>. Accessed 26 April 2024.
 - 6 Behind The Veil provided the key sources for an award-winning book: William Henry Chafe, Raymond Gavins and Robert Korstad (eds), *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001). Many of the project’s interviews and other primary sources have since been digitised and made publicly available. See John Hope Franklin Research Center, Behind the Veil. Available at <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil>. Accessed 27 April 2024.
 - 7 Chafe, *Lifting the Chains*, xiv–xv.

after the 1960s.⁸ Sixth, African Americans have always known the importance of ‘economic change as well as political and legal change’ (p. xvii). These arguments, though sometimes over-repeated, form useful touchstones across 13 chapters that span over a century of history. They also emphasise the durability and relevance of the subject matter.

The chapters proceed chronologically. Chapter 1 focuses on Emancipation and Reconstruction in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when optimism persisted in the South despite systemic disadvantages for Black farmers and the intensification of white supremacy. Chapter 2 ranges from the 1877 withdrawal of federal troops from the South to the onset of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s. Chapters 3 to 5 provide details on key Black social institutions and other foundations of struggle: family, church and community, where there was more autonomy; education and work, where African Americans skilfully balanced between positive action and appearing non-threatening to whites; and politics and resistance, which continued, both subtly and directly, throughout Jim Crow.

Chapters 6 to 8 cover World War One, the interwar years and World War Two. While the first war ‘raised hopes, only to have them dashed’ (p. 159), and the New Deal brought only limited benefits to most Black Americans, World War Two brought ‘an avalanche of [economic] opportunities’ and illuminated the incompatibility of U.S. rhetoric about its values with the reality of its race relations (p. 205). These changes birthed the post-war civil rights movement, as Chapter 9 shows.

The 1960s, the movement’s zenith, are the focus of Chapters 10 to 12. Chafe details achievements and limitations, cooperations and divisions, within the Black community and between Black and white Americans. Then, because ‘[t]he movement had come so far – yet it was not over’ (p. 289), Chapter 13 continues from the 1960s to the present, covering mass incarceration, police brutality, contemporary voter suppression, and, overall, the apparent implacability of racism in U.S. society. Chafe

8 I am aware that use of the terms ‘Black’ and ‘Blacks’ is generally considered unacceptable in Australia. My use of them in this review adopts currently accepted U.S. linguistic and cultural conventions (including capitalisation), to reflect the U.S. context of the subject matter.

attributes this not only to white supremacy, but also systemic economic disadvantage, which he convincingly traces to a lack of meaningful reform during Reconstruction.

The book's chronology, though offering few surprises for anyone with a reasonable knowledge of U.S. history, provides a contextual backdrop of events, movements, and key figures against which lesser-known people and experiences are usefully highlighted. Each chapter features individuals whose words and experiences become, like the six themes, helpful touchstones. Abraham Galloway, the Civil War soldier, escaped slave, and campaigner for Black citizenship rights, stands out in the first half of the book, while Ella Baker, the NAACP activist and organiser, is one of many whose stories enrich the second.

Individual voices are both essential and effective in this book. The themes and familiar chronology are also useful. Yet they occasionally limit, rather than enhance, the book's sense of immediacy, freshness and clarity. Some individuals, though named in the endnotes, are lost to generalisation and anonymity in the main text. To someone unfamiliar with the sources, it is not always clear why some people are named and others not. On the other hand, the book's main arguments, especially regarding the agency of Black Americans, are unequivocally articulated and clearly contextualised. This is vital considering the often-fraught national conversation to which Chafe – himself a white academic – is contributing. Yet the *degree* of repetition of these arguments in the earlier chapters, plus a broader tendency to reiterate major themes and events, does sometimes interrupt the flow of an otherwise lively and readable text. Moreover, though the context is generally helpful, Chafe does hit fairly standard macrohistorical beats: major events, laws, court cases, leading activists, and significant U.S. presidents. Overall, however, his juxtaposition of the familiar and unfamiliar is effective, demonstrating the radical potential of oral history to centre voices that are overshadowed or invisible in written records.

In *Lifting the Chains*, oral and written sources provide what Chafe once called the 'mutual reinforcement' of hidden insights and essential context.⁹ It is oral history

9 William H. Chafe, 'A Note on Sources', *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 270.

that fully reveals the depth, breadth, pluralities, and persistence of the U.S. Black freedom struggle, even during Jim Crow when it is often assumed to have stalled, and that Black men and women, not white saviours, have been the primary drivers of change. Key strengths of the book include its demonstration of continuities from the nineteenth century to the present, and the intersection of political, economic, and social issues in the ongoing struggle for equality, shown through the centring of Black voices. Microhistorical details – individual, familial, and community experiences, heartening successes tempered by accounts of violence and oppression – elevate the book from familiar retelling to a timely new synthesis of unique and irreplaceable archives. Ultimately, *Lifting the Chains* paints an invaluable picture of a people who, though consistently victimised, have rarely, if ever, allowed themselves to be victims.